

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

By HENRY WANSBROUGH

THROUGHOUT most of the biblical period, and certainly during the centuries which immediately preceded the birth of Christ, Palestine was, as now, a constant prey to strife, discord and war. Treasuring their independence for religious as well as ethnic reasons, yet lying on the fringe of great totalitarian empires, the Chosen People were harassed first by Assyria, then by Babylon, then alternately by Syria and Egypt, and finally by Rome. Peace was seen as a blessing to be conferred by God, part of the blessedness of the messianic reign. In the unsettled world of the late Roman Republic, with its upheavals, reversals, changes of government and shifting allegiances, a world in which stability could hardly be hoped for, the longing for peace all over the Roman Empire comes to expression in latin literature. The message of peace put forward by Christianity cannot have failed to find a response in a world which produced the Fourth Eclogue of Virgil, with its yearning for peace. So ardent was the longing to be set free from the mischances and upsets of that unstable and turbulent era, that Stoicism, the popular philosophy which formed the mental baggage of all the educated classes, retreated into the concept of *ataraxia*. This ideal was to be undisturbed by any vicissitude in life, to be protected from calamity by a 'stoical' indifference to disaster, free from any emotion; it was an ideal which seems inhuman and calloused, a protection by withdrawal from reality and from the richness, often harrowing, of human experience. This was not the way of the hebraeo-christian tradition.

In the Old Testament, attention to the concept of peace springs to importance at the same time as Messianism. Messianism is fundamentally a looking forward to an ideal, in the confidence that God will sometime renew all things, purge away evil and fulfil all human longings. In this renewal, God's personal representative plays sometimes a more important, sometimes less important part; but always the greater the threat to Israel's well-being, the more ardent

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is the yearning for the renewal. It could be seen, like the Stoic *ataraxia*, to be a form of escapism, a burying of the head in the sand, a focusing on a Utopia so distant that the more unpleasant aspects of the immediate future remain entirely blurred. But to view Messianism as another form of escapism would be an utter misunderstanding, for it is founded on confidence in God's love for his people, and the conviction that he will, in due time, completely fulfil his promises to them.

The prophetic movement, Messianism and the longing for peace are all indissolubly tied together, for the function of the prophets was to explain to Israel the nature and purpose of the threat which faced them: the external, hostile threat was Yahweh's means of correcting them, purging them, and bringing them back to a condition in which they could truly serve him. Thus, from its first appearance in Hosea, peace has an important theological and religious dimension. As the threat of Assyria against Israel developed, Hosea glimpsed the peace of the desert underneath the storm-clouds. He looked back to an ideal of untroubled and unbroken fidelity of the young bride to her spouse in the honeymoon period of the desert wanderings, when the marriage-alliance was fresh and unsullied by Israel's unfaithfulness. This unbroken joy was to be a model for the total peace when the alliance was renewed, a peace which would extend to all creation, working together in harmony:

When that day comes I shall make a treaty for them
with the wild animals, with the birds of heaven
and the creeping things of the earth;
I shall break bow and sword and warfare,
and banish them from the country,
and I will let them sleep secure (Hos 2,20).

This peace is more than a deliverance from war, a release from strife; it is a positive alliance and binding together between God and man and all creation. In the imagery of the animals one may glimpse an allusion even further back, beyond the desert idyll, to the state of sinless harmony of the Garden of Eden before the fall. Not merely war, but all the aggression and competitiveness consequent on the fall, is to be transcended.

At about the same time, in the southern kingdom of Judah, where the tradition of the davidic line of kings was so much more important, Isaiah is promising that this state of peace and harmony will be brought by a prince of peace (9,5). The harmony of wolf with

lamb, of panther with goat — in each case normally predator and prey — is the symbol of an agreement of the whole creation (Isai 11,1-9). But the real significance of it does not remain in doubt, for this peace and saving justice flow from the spirit of Yahweh filling the 'sprig from the root of Jesse'; it is founded on man's acceptance of and co-operation with the gift of God. Peace founded on the spirit of Yahweh is no dead or negative peace. It is a positive force, invigorating those who enter into it to spread God's kingship.

The quality of this peace is best shown by its counterfeit. The prophets of this period at the end of the monarchy, when the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah were constantly under threat of being engulfed by the great empires to the east, concentrated their message on the promise of peace. The difference between the true and the false prophets seems to have been that, whereas the true prophets promised peace for a distant era only after punishment and purging, the false prophets promised it now, implying that everything was as it should be and that there was no need for any conversion. It is the function of the prophet to interpret the situation to the people according to God's view, which they made no attempt to do:

So long as they have something to eat
they cry 'Peace' (Mic 3,5);

or again, a century later, under the babylonian threat,

Here are the prophets telling them
'You will not see the sword, famine will not touch you;
I promise you true peace in this place' (Jer 14,13).

Unless the peace is founded on true peace with God, it is counterfeit, transitory and worthless:

If only you had listened to my commandments!
Your peace would have been like a river
and your saving justice like the waves of the sea (Isai 48,18).

In the earliest gospel tradition, Jesus is seen to be fulfilling these hopes. The Messiah was to be a prince of peace, and by his miracles, the signs of the Kingdom, he did bring a beginning of the peace of God. The miracles were no more than signs that the kingship of God was being realized in Jesus: the fully-developed kingship of God was to abolish sickness, suffering and death altogether; Jesus's miracles

do no more than inaugurate this by abolishing some sickness, some suffering and some death. It is in the same way that the miracles inaugurate the peace of God. He says to the woman with the haemorrhage, who for twelve years had 'suffered much' from doctors and their ineffectiveness, 'Go in peace' or (more exactly but more awkwardly translated) 'Enter into peace' (Mk 5,34). One of the most striking illustrations of Jesus's power to bring peace is the contrast between the violence of the ravings of the madman of Gerasa, howling and gashing himself among the tombs, snapping fetters and uncontrollably violent, and this same man restored, sitting clothed and calm with Jesus (Mk 5,3-16). The kingdom of peace is also surely symbolized by the calming of the storm, when Jesus brings peace to the elements themselves (Mk 4,39). Luke treats in the same way a miracle of conversion, when the repentant sinner in Simon's house, having wept on Jesus's feet and had her sins forgiven, is told to 'go in peace' (Lk 7,50); forgiveness also brings God's peace and so inaugurates the kingdom.

It is remarkable how, both in the synoptic tradition and in John, peace is treated as something almost graspable. It is not merely that the risen Christ says 'Peace be with you' when he comes among them (Lk 24,36; Jn 20,19.21.26). This may be no more than the common Jewish salutation *Shalom*, so moving to those unaccustomed to it, but so ordinary to current users; though there may be significance in the fact that it is used only after the resurrection. But in the instructions to the missionaries, peace is regarded as a force or a charge which can be given to someone; if it is not accepted it does not simply lapse as one would expect, but returns to the giver: 'If the house deserves it, may your peace come upon it; if it does not, may your peace come back to you' (Mt 10,13; cf Lk 10,6). And it is in the same sense that at the Johannine last supper, Jesus makes the solemn gift of his peace to his disciples (Jn 14,27), at the beginning of the final discourse which is so full of peace and reassurance. Indeed, the gift of peace serves as a sort of bracket which encloses the whole discourse — or at least one version of it. The seventeenth chapter may be viewed as an independent version, since at the end of the previous chapter Jesus concludes: 'I have told you all this so that you may find peace in me' (Jn 16,33). It is all very well to say that the evangelists, or at least the synoptists, are guilty of a category-mistake here; peace is not something like an orange which can be kept if the gift is refused, or like an ash-tray which can be bequeathed. Clearly, however, peace is being thought of as

something tangible, a force which may be given and received, communicated and refused.

Luke and Matthew both make extensive use of the concept of peace, but in different senses; with Luke, peace is thought of primarily as qualifying the relationship between God and man. John the Baptist's work as prophet will be 'to guide our feet into the way of peace' (Lk 1,79); and as soon as Jesus is born the angels praise God with the words

Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those he favours (Lk 2,14).

And while at the solemn entry into Jerusalem, so significant as the moment at which the Messiah enters into his possession, the whole group of disciples joyfully cry out 'Peace in heaven', the refusal of the Pharisees to accept their ovation brings Jesus to lament for Jerusalem: 'If only you, too, had understood today the message of peace' (Lk 19,38-42). The gospel can be wholly characterized as a message of peace (Acts 10,36): and primarily envisaged as peace with God — acceptance of his favour — as the angels, the *Benedictus* and the chant at the entry into Jerusalem indicate (Lk 19,38).

Matthew, on the other hand, starts out from quite a different problematic, and has a largely different view of peace. Luke's vision of peace could be described as vertical, but Matthew's is definitely horizontal. The number of times that there is mention of dissension and the need for unlimited forgiveness within the community inevitably suggests that within Matthew's community there were deep and obtrusive divisions and dissensions; the peace which he sees Christ's presence as bringing is peace between the brethren. Chapter eighteen, one of the five major discourses of the gospel, concerns the community, and the remarkable thing is that it is concerned almost entirely with peaceful relationships between brethren. It exhorts to child-like openness (vv 1-4), to care rather than to contempt for the stray (vv 5-14), instructs how to correct the errant brother (vv 15-17), assures of the presence of Christ wherever there is agreement between brothers (vv 19-20), and finally concentrates on limitless forgiveness (vv 21-35). Similarly the one aspect of the Lord's Prayer which Matthew singles out for emphasis is forgiveness; this petition alone is picked up and stressed at the end of the prayer.

It is not, therefore, surprising that when Matthew is giving us the series of six corrections of the Old Law which forms the major part of

the first section of the Sermon on the Mount, the angle is the same. It has often been remarked that the first and last of these concern love of each other: the first in a negative formulation, not to express hate and contempt; the sixth in a positive form, to love as perfectly as the heavenly Father loves. It is, however, worth noticing that at least the first correction presupposes a state of fairly extreme hostility within the community, where there appears to be danger of people going around and calling their brother 'Fool' and 'Renegade', of one brother taking another to court; the last correction equally presupposes a state of persecution and hostility from outside the community, with 'enemies' who 'persecute you', and whom it is tempting not to greet. In this situation, both within and outside the community, peace is again not simply a matter of absence from strife, not merely a casual greeting of *Shalom*. For any validity it requires a good deal of positive effort to overcome obstacles; it can only be won as a positive achievement. So it comes as no surprise that the peacemaker is numbered by Matthew among the eight classes who merit a beatitude: the only beatitude awarded for doing anything, since the others describe a spiritual attitude.

In the pauline writings there are times when peace seems to be almost the dominant trait of Christianity, when he regards the gospel almost principally as the 'good news of peace'. Every letter, of course, begins with the greeting of 'Peace'. On the one hand, this may seem no more than the epistolary formula current at the time; to understand it as having a genuine meaning would then be as gross a misunderstanding as our considering 'Dear Sir' to be an expression of affection. On the other hand, the peace which he wishes is no ordinary peace, no greeting from himself; he wishes peace always from 'God our Father', and couples this blessing always with the blessing of grace or favour: that benevolent regard of God which really warms and blesses those on whom it is turned. In the Old Testament, *shalom* is occasionally translated into Greek not as 'peace' but as 'salvation'; and one can divine from the closeness of the two words in the hebrew mind that Paul is using 'peace' as a sort of shorthand for all the blessings of salvation.

When Paul uses 'peace' in a more specific sense, he uses it in both the vertical and horizontal dimensions. In the Letter to the Romans, the great theme is reconciliation to God by the obedience of the second Adam, which rectifies the discord caused by the disobedience of the first Adam; the means to this are first the saving justice of God, and with it the faith of man. But the end product is expressed

simply as 'peace': '... now that we have been justified for our faith and are at peace through our Lord Jesus Christ ...' (5,1). Peace in Romans, then, is the overcoming of the obstacles which separate man from God; it is won by Christ's obedience and appropriated by each man in faith. In Corinthians, however, the dimensions of peace is much more horizontal, determined by the natural divisions within that heterogeneous community at the port-town of Corinth, where philosopher, dock-worker, prostitute and athlete all rubbed shoulders together. Almost all Paul's advice to them concerns ways to overcome disharmony and disturbance. Whether it be about the pretensions of some to wisdom, disregard of the consciences of others in the matter of dietary rules, separate groupings at the eucharist or the gifts of the Spirit, the only criterion of action is peace in the community. Of such paramount importance is this that it even transcends the marriage-bond, if a partnership between a Christian and a non-Christian cannot be lived out in peace; for 'God has called you to live in peace' (1 Cor 7,15). Since his theme here is the organic unity of the body of Christ, in which every member has its part to play, peace is an obvious prerequisite, 'for God is a God not of disorder but of peace' (14,33). A third letter in which peace plays a major part is that to the Ephesians; here the theme is directly unity between Jews and Gentiles. Christ is our peace (2,14) in both the horizontal and vertical dimensions, for he has bound all men together into one new man, animated by the Spirit which is the bond of peace (2,15;4,3). At the same time, he has brought the peace which gives us free access to the Father by killing the hostility in his own person, and reconciling both Jew and Gentile to God (2,14-17).

In so many respects Paul's thought is the flowering and fulfilment of the Old Testament; and in his treatment of this concept, too, he is only working out and applying the concept of messianic peace as it was promised in the prophets. There is, however, one aspect of the Old Testament concept which comes to view not so much in Paul, but more prominently in two other works of the New Testament: peace as an aspect of the *eschaton*, something which is still an object of hope and of yearning, which can reach its fulfilment only at the last times. This comes to expression very differently in the Book of Revelation and in the Letter to the Hebrews. In the former, the word 'peace' occurs only twice: in the initial greeting and in the vision of a celestial horseman whose mission it is to take peace away (6,4). At the end, however, we are shown a vision of peace — not under that name but under the names of triumph and victory to

the Lamb. This is a different concept of peace, a peace gained by the strength which achieves its purpose by violence rather than in power transcending and obviating violence. In the highly symbolic language of apocalyptic, which is here found at its most dramatic, the description of triumph through military might cannot be understood to sanction a reversal of all the values of peace which have gone before in the Bible; it is simply a vivid, pictorial way of representing the power of God which excels all other. The end-product is the vision of peace in the heavenly Jerusalem.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, the concept of final peace is rather one of final rest, rest after toil and journeying. The place of rest promised to the Israelites on their journey through the desert was only an image of the true place of rest, finally promised to us through a firm grasp of faith and confidence in Christ. The Israelites forfeited their place of rest by refusal to believe; we are to reach the place of rest and the Sabbath-peace of God by clinging perseveringly to Christ (Heb 3,7 — 4,13). In the Greek, a different word is used from that normally used for peace; but nevertheless the author clearly has in mind the complete and final fulfilment of the promises of messianic peace.

Peace, then, is a sort of code-word for the blessings awaited in the messianic age and in its final fulfilment. It comports both a vertical dimension of peace between God and men and a horizontal dimension of peace between men. As with all the other aspects of salvation, it is not to be won without effort, without trust and without generosity. Christ himself is the author of peace, and the man who follows his role as a peace-maker is deservedly, with him, called a son of God.